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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine pronominal usage by college students, with particular reference to the use of the generic "he." Subjects, 25 students in a nonverbal communication class and 30 students in an organizational communication course, completed essays describing the behaviors of a high status individual in response to a question worded in a sex-neutral manner. The essays were then coded for sexist and incorrect pronoun usage. Two weeks after the writing assignment, the students heard a lecture on sexist pronoun usage, then wrote another essay on the same topic. These essay were analyzed for any evidence of linguistic change. Results showed that 69% of the students used incorrect pronoun forms, primarily the generic "he," on the first assignment. After receiving instruction on sexist language, only 35% continued to use the forms on the second assignment, and use of the generic "he" decreased by 50%. On the first assignment, more females than males used the incorrect pronoun forms and only 60% of the females changed to the correct forms on the second assignment, compared to 70% for the males. This suggests that women are still likely to stereotype men as generally high in status, and that men are more aware of women's increasing visibility in high status occupations. (Copies of the essay topic and an outline of the sexist language lecture are appended.) (FL)

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WHO'S THE BOSS?: HE, HE/SHE, OR THEY?

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WHO'S THE BOSS?: HE, HE/SHE, OR THEY?

ABSTRACT

This study examines pronominal usage by college students, with particular reference to use of the generic 'he'. Subjects completed essays describing a high status individual, which were coded for sexist and incorrect usage of pronouns. A brief instructional unit on problems connected with such usage was presented to the students, with encouragement for linguistic change. Subjects were then re-tested by use of the same essay on status; these essays were analyzed for evidence of change. Males and females used differing pronominal forms and responded differently to suggested linguistic changes. The differences are discussed in connection with ascribed status, and educators are encouraged to act as linguistic change agents.

WHO'S THE BOSS?: HE, HE/SHE, OR THEY?

Communication researchers and linguists have focused attention on the use of masculine generic references--nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. The origin of these generic terms is not a focus for this discussion; the issue at hand is the usage of such references in modern day oral and written language. No matter the source, historically masculine generic terms have been acceptable forms, encompassing all persons, male and female. This usage has never been appropriate in terms of accuracy, but concerned feminists have increased awareness of the inaccuracy and limiting nature of generic terms.

The purpose of this research is to, first, investigate the opposition arising against masculine generic forms, in particular, masculine generic pronouns, in order to assess the opportunity for linguistic change. Second, the research examines the possible divergent use of generic pronouns by male and female college students and the effects of anti-generic instruction upon students' written forms of expression. The study focuses on generic pronouns and prescribed status with the intent of discovering current usage and the propensity for change.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Since this study investigates males' and females' use of the generic pronoun 'he', the first issue to be confronted is: Why conduct sex-related research at all? Sex/gender-related research flourished twenty years ago, but faded for a period of time due to the difficulty in the interpretation of findings. Sex role findings in communication studies were unclear and confusing; there was no conceptual base for sex

differences. In time, with the efforts of the feminist movement, and the conceptual shift to interpersonal theory, communication research has witnessed a swing backward (or forward) to gender research. This research exposes current usage of pronouns in written communication as an initial attempt to discover sex-role orientations. Students' perceptions of sex roles affect their communication; this research is a first step toward an understanding of sex-biased communication. It is obvious that more work must be done.

Pearson (1984) calls for the need "to continue to develop theories which describe and explain the communicative behaviors of women and men" (p. 21). Baird (1976) found a disparity in the literature on sex differences, citing Shaw's (1981) comprehensive text on small group communication, as including only eleven studies focusing on sex differences in groups. Shaw (1981) comments in his text that "little careful research has been directed toward identification of the consequences of sex differences . . ." (p. 183). Since that time communication scholars have substantially added to the body of gender-related studies.

Baird (1976) provided further rationale for offering his comprehensive review of sex-related research by exposing the limitations of the current use of gender as a variable. It has not been the focus of research, but merely used as a control variable which, by statistical treatment may allow researchers significant outcomes for the "important" variables in their studies. Since the 1970's communication research has attempted to focus more specifically on gender and its effect on communication processes. But a significant amount of research still includes gender as a mere control variable to be reported if differences emerge, and to be discounted if they do not. This still represents a severe limitation in communication research.

Another existing bias has to do with interpreting and applying outcomes of gender research. Once a researcher finds sex differences in communication settings, what does he/she do with the information? Most people are aware that differences exist, and feel no need to define, quantify, and possibly attempt to equalize the differences. In response to this bias, Montgomery and Norton (1981) conclude:

> Communication sex differences in and of themselves are relatively uninteresting. However, discovering the impact of those differences on various outcome or content variables is exciting. To the extent that information about male/female differences and similarities will help researchers and educators better understand the communication process, the results of studies . . . are meaningful (p. 132).

This research will attempt to discover how college students are using the generic 'he', with special attention to male-female differences in usage.

Having made the case for sex-related research, the next step is to review the history of the generic 'he', as outlined in the literature. Lakoff (1975) is a good beginning point for any gender-related discussion.

In her book, Language and Woman's Place, Robin Lakoff (1975) opened a lot of eyes, encouraged much debate and discussion, and, flatly, outraged males and females alike because of her controversial ideas. Many of these ideas seem not so controversial now, almost ten years later. However, one paradoxical point Lakoff raised of special pertinence to this research dealt with the opportunity for linguistic change. She espoused that changing pronominal usage was futile; pronouns are too embedded in language and reflect unconscious choice. Linguistic change

must follow rather than precede other social change. Gender-related research and classroom instruction attempts to refute Lakoff's views that pronominal change will not occur.

MacKay (1983), in a comprehensive essay on pronominal problems, calls the use of the generic 'he', as meaning 'he or she', "defective" (p. 38). The essay exposes faulty assumptions which defend such usage. One assumption, the generic assumption, argues that 'he' refers to all persons when used with a sex-indefinite antecedent. This has not been supported in cases where antecedents refer to male or female occupations; the pronouns chosen have a direct link to the stereotypes associated with professions (Stericker, 1981). Another assumption is based on the neutrality of the generic 'he'; however, 'he' has not been proven neutral as it leads to masculine interpretations (Martyna, 1978).

"Inaccurate, derogatory, and limiting" are the terms Bate (1978) uses to describe the English language (p. 139). Changes in sexist language are being advocated by educators, publishers, and legislators to reduce the confusion and bias inherent in the language. Bate interviewed university faculty members to determine if sexist language usage is changing. The faculty responded to a variety of sexist terms by indicating if they were comfortable, uncomfortable, or neutral concerning the usage. Results reflect change and controversy. Derogatory sex-related terms, such as "gal" caused more discomfort than generic references. Bate explains: "Faculty members found questions of pronoun choice confusing and inexcapable" (p. 145). In general, there was high acceptance of the alternate form 'he or she', moderate uncertainty over 's/he' due to pronunciation problems, and rejection of 'they' as an alternative due to its grammatical incorrectness.

In a similar study of pronominal usage, Martyna (1978) asked college

students to complete fragments which required pronouns to refer to sex-indefinite antecedents. The fragments provided male-related roles, female-related roles, and neutral roles in attempts to inspect the generic 'he'. Martyna reasons: "If 'he' is an adequate generic term, we would expect it to be used whenever a pronoun must be chosen without knowing the sex of the referent" (p. 132). Students completed fragments in both written and oral modes, and then responded to a questionnaire reflecting their choices. The results showed significant differences in male/female subjects' use of pronouns. In the written mode, the specific 'he' was used more often than the generic 'he'; masculine pronouns referred to male-typed references, and 'she' was used with fragments referring to female-typed roles. The women were significantly less willing to use 'he' than were the men. Alternative forms were employed most often in neutral-role fragments. Martyna believes that these results reflect confusion and a degree of change. When students verbalized endings to fragments alternative forms were more frequent. The use of 'they' reflects a more informal, colloquial style connected with the oral mode. The form 'he or she' was occasionally written, but not spoken. Martyna concludes that "the presumed sex of sentence subject has marked influence on the kind of pronoun chosen" (p. 135). By using 'he or she' or 'they' students indicated that the generic 'he' did not suffice as an all-person encompassing term.

Another problem with the generic 'he' is in its connection with other universal forms of male references. McConnell-Ginet (1980) describes "guys" as a male reference used for all persons. In this case, the reference is as universalizing as the generic 'he'. Female references do not lose sex-specificity, but become homogenized as extensions of more traditional terms. McConnell-Ginet categorizes universality and homogeneity

as "aspects of a male-centered perspective on language" (p. 9).

It is obvious that the use of the generic 'he' is becoming increasingly unacceptable in its "double semantic duty" (Martyna, 1978, p. 131). It should be omitted from language use due to its ambiguity, exclusion of women, and perpetuation of inequity between the sexes. Other researchers have reached this conclusion and are investigating alternate forms and ways to bring about this badly needed linguistic change (Bodine, 1975; Blaubergs, 1978; Wilson, 1978; Adamsky, 1981; Todd-Mancillas, 1981; Richmond & Dyba, 1982; Steinem, 1983). But change is never a simple process.

The first step toward effecting any change is awareness that a problem exists that needs correcting. Bodine (1975) believes that these linguistic changes, both in oral and written modes, are already underway. She argues for the use of 'they' as an acceptable generic option, due to its ease and current usage in everyday oral language. Bodine has gone to the extent of challenging education in its backward teaching of the generic 'he' as an appropriate form. Grammatical incorrectness is not as great a problem as grammatical (and societal) exclusion. Bodine concludes: ". . . any aspect of the language code or language usage is susceptible to conscious change provided that the necessary motivation and proper field for implementation exists . . ." (p. 143). Bate (1976) agrees and states: "It is clear that speakers can make conscious changes in their language habits if they have information, interpersonal relationships, and professional situations which support language change" (p. 148).

MacKay (1983) explains resistance to changing pronominal usage in that pronouns are a "closed class" (p. 48). He agrees that oral changes may be easily and quickly adopted, but that the true test comes in formal, written expressions.

Given that change is occurring, or at least is imminent, what alternative forms to the generic 'he' are acceptable? Blaubergs (1978) provides the most comprehensive discussion on how this change can proceed. She advocates circumvention as a tactic to eliminate gender-specific terms. Some of the elements of circumvention include: (1) substitution of plural forms, such as 'they'; (2) circumlocutions which add words or reword phrases to avoid gender-references; (3) indefinites, such as 'one' or 'someone'; (4) modifiers, which allow avoidance of suffixes (i.e., -ette, -ess); (5) neologisms, as in 'wo/men' and 's/he'; (6) neutral pronouns, like 'he/she', and; (7) the use of the reference 'you'. Blaubergs calls for continued research to discover the appropriateness and acceptability of each of these forms.

Of the forms of change outlined, the use of 'he or she' and 'they' seem to outweigh the others in acceptability and current usage. 'He or she' or the shortened from 's/he' have become adopted as stylistic standards by associations publishing professional journals. Even though the form 'they' remains grammatically incorrect, it has been well-received and validated by most research. Bate (1978) claims that, for her subjects, " . . . the pronoun 'they' offered a conveniently unobtrusive way to avoid choosing the gender of a subject. Because of this ease of option, a form such as 'a person . . . they' may come into acceptance for written English as well (as oral)" (p. 146).

Another element connected to pronominal usage is status. Unfortunately few studies have been conducted on the relationship of pronominal usage and perceptions of status. Stericker's (1981) study on perceptions of male-female roles as reflected in job choices is revealing, but does not directly include status as a variable affecting perceptions and subsequent pronominal choice. Stericker sought to discover if the traditional use of the generic 'he' narrowed persons' perceptions and confirmed

sex-role stereotypes. Subjects were given job descriptions with the references 'he', 'he or she', or 'they' included. Stericker questioned whether job descriptions using 'he' would be less attractive to males and females than descriptions using 'he or she' or 'they'. She also examined whether these same jobs would be perceived as more difficult for a woman to obtain. The results showed that women were more attracted to those job descriptions employing alternative forms of pronouns and less attracted to those using the generic 'he'. Males' attraction to job descriptions did not vary across all pronoun conditions. Females also perceived those job descriptions with 'he or she' and 'they' as more easily obtainable. Males thought that job descriptions with 'he or she' references would be harder for women to secure than those using 'he' or 'they'. Stericker concludes that females may be more cognitively influenced by pronoun variation than males. An obvious omission in this research is the consideration of status as a variable effecting occupational perceptions. The argument can be made that subjects responded to job descriptions due to perceptions of status, not because of pronominal usage. For example, a female subject might be attracted to an architect's job because of status, but not feel able to obtain the job due to the male-dominance in that field. Status appears to be a stronger predictor of perceptions and responses in this study than pronominal usage. The argument could also be made that status and pronouns are directly related. Perhaps subjects' views of status jobs were confirmed or altered by the inclusion of certain pronouns in the job descriptions. Whatever the case, status is a variable that cannot be overlooked in a discussion of sexist language.

One study of status and sexist pronouns was conducted by Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) in which the authors exposed "neutral pronouns" as being non-neutral. The study revealed subjects' preferences for

pronouns and the images conveyed by pronominal usage. Subjects were asked to construct stories based on sentences using either 'he', 'they', or 'he or she' and their derivatives. When the pronoun 'his' was used in a sentence, 35% of the story characters that subjects provided were female; for 'their' 46% were female, and for 'his or her', 56% were female. These results indicate that the generic 'he' is not being used as a generic, but predominantly elicits male connotations and imagery. Subjects responded that they imagined male figures when the term 'his' was used in a sentence. The authors claim that masculine generic forms fail to be neutral: "Thus, linguistic form can be a cause of sexism as well as the reverse" (p. 1033). They further suggest that choices of pronouns are embedded in one's view of status and that ". . . using the male terms as gender-neutral terms is an unpleasant reminder of the lower status of women . . . this usage (should) be changed as a sign of good will and for symptoms relief" (p. 1033).

Moulton et. al also bring out another interesting point by comparing the use of the generic 'he' to use of terms such as "Kleenex", "Vaseline", and "Clorox." The latter references indicate a brand name product; however, due to an achievement in status, they are now used as generics to mean all tissues and all brands of petroleum jelly and bleach. These researchers believe: "A term that refers to a high status subset of a larger class is being used in place of a neutral term" (p. 1035). The generic 'he' refers to the high status male subset of humankind, but is being used to replace neutral, non-exclusive terms.

The research has demonstrated the present discontent with the use of sexist pronouns and has offered substitute terms and methods for counteracting the inequity. It is evident that the generic 'he' is on its rightful way out of the language, but how can one aid in the facilitation of this linguistic change? Education may be the key.

The present study focuses on pronominal usage of college students in written forms, and the connection of that usage to status. The purpose can be summarized by the following research questions:

Q1: Given prescriptions of status, do male and female college students vary in written pronominal usage, with specific references to the generic 'he'?

Q2: Given that sexist pronouns are present in written forms, can this usage be altered through classroom instruction?

METHODS & PROCEDURES

Subjects. Fifty-five college undergraduates served as the subject pool. Twenty-five were enrolled in a nonverbal communication course; thirty were enrolled in an introductory course in organizational communication. Subjects are communication majors of traditional college age, except for two older females returning to complete their degrees. Thirty subjects were female; twenty-five were male.

Procedures. Students received a midterm examination essay question dealing with behaviors of high status individuals. The question was worded in a neutral manner--no sex-related nouns or pronouns were used and no references were included that could imply a specific gender of the high status individual. The essay questions varied only slightly for the two classes. The nonverbal class was asked to describe the nonverbal behaviors of a high status individual; the organizational communication class described nonverbal as well as verbal behavior and status symbols. (See appendices A & B.) Students also provided demographic information on sex, age, major, and grade point average.

Approximately two weeks after the exam, a 15-minute lecture on sexist pronoun usage was given to both classes. Efforts were made to control the content of the lesson so as to cause no variation in results from the two classes. (See appendix C.)

In a subsequent class session, students were asked to complete another essay on status and communication behavior. The wording was virtually the same, except for efforts to include information known by both the nonverbal and organizational communication students.

The same essay question was used in order to control for any effects of content on pronominal usage.

I attempted to account for the exercise by explaining that a graduate student colleague was conducting research on status and its reflection in nonverbal behavior. The fictitious person had asked me if she could collect her data in my classes, since her topic was covered in my classroom instruction. I encountered no dissent or suspicious questions concerning the exercise.

Another potential problem in this activity concerned the commitment or "sanction" connected to the test and re-test. The first test elicited high student commitment due to its nature as a midterm essay question which had bearing on students' grades. The second essay did not have this reward or sanction, and, therefore, could have been treated casually by the students. To counteract this, I encouraged students to give as much effort to the essay as they had done previously, and rewarded participation by offering course extra credit. (Sometimes bribes are helpful tactics!) Assumedly, if students knew that they were receiving extra course credit for participation, they would respond with equal commitment.

Coding. All essays were coded for pronominal usage only, with reference to the sex of the subject. Responses were categorized as follows:

1 = exclusive use of 'he'

2 = exclusive use of 'she'

3 = exclusive and incorrect use of 'they'

4 = exclusive use of 'he/she', 'he or she', & 's/he'

5 = use of 'he/she' and infrequent incorrect 'they'

6 = use of 'he' & incorrect use of 'they'

7 = use of 'you'

8 = no reference used

9 = use of 'he/she' and correct use of plural form 'they'

10 = primary use of 'he/she'; infrequent use of 'he'

For analysis, categories were condensed into correct usage, incorrect usage, and other. Categories 1, 2, 3, and 6 were coded as incorrect; categories 4, 5, 9, and 10 were coded as correct; categories 7 and 8 constituted a non-reference category. This non-reference distinction is neither correct nor incorrect.

Analysis. A chi square analysis was performed on the data to reveal differences from observed to expected scores for the dependent variable pronominal usage, as affected by the independent variable, sex of subject. The two essays were analyzed separately; scores were compared to assess change in pronominal usage.

RESULTS

A chi square for the variables pronominal usage in essay one and sex of subject produced significant results ($x^2 = 34.95$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$). For the variables pronominal usage in essay two and sex of subject, a second chi square produced significant results as well ($x^2 = 27.96$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$).

Analysis of the first essay revealed that 25% of subjects used correct forms of pronominal usage; 69% used incorrect forms, and 5% fell into the category 3--no reference or use of 'you'. Twenty-seven percent of females used correct forms, 70% used incorrect forms, and 3% used category 3 forms. For male subjects, correct forms were used by 24% of the males; 68% used incorrect forms, and 8% used no references or the term 'you'.

In the second round of essays, significant changes were produced. Sixty-two percent of subjects responded in a correct form; 35% incorrect, and 3% other form. For females, scores showed a significant shift to correct forms: 57% of females used correct forms, 40% used incorrect forms, and 3% responded with 'you' or no references. Males changed forms in the second essay more significantly than females, towards using correct forms (68%); 28% used incorrect forms, and 4% used no forms or 'you'.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to discover whether changes in pronominal usage as connected with perceptions of status could be induced in college students' written forms of expression. The findings are exciting and encouraging.

Out of the total subject pool, 69% used incorrect pronominal forms in the first essay. The most common form used (assumed incorrect by the

researcher) was the generic 'he'. After receiving instruction on the problems associated with incorrect pronominal forms, only 35% of subjects continued to use these forms on the second essay. Use of the generic 'he' decreased by more than 50%. This represents a highly significant change. However, it should be noted at this point that the reseacher does not naively conclude that students were persuaded to omit use of the generic 'he' because they adopted nonsexist language into their personal belief systems. I do recognize the authoritative instructional elements that played a role in this experiment.

Flanagan and Todd-Mancillas (1982) studied the effects of two instructional strategies on pronominal usage change in college students. They describe the authority method as a strategy in which the innovator forces change upon individuals lower in rank, status, prestige, power, etc. Individuals must conform to the innovation regardless of personal opinions. The second strategy allows the individual to decide for him/herself if change is necessary. Thus, this strategy is termed "optional decisions" (p. 276). Clearly the authority method was used in this study, and there are pros and cons connected with its use. Flanagan and Todd-Mancillas report that the authority method is the fastest and most complete form for effecting change. However, retention is a problem. Students may simply be complying to a teacher/evaluator's wishes to win approval. The change may only be on paper, not reflective of any personal attitudinal change. When the classroom evaluation sanction is removed, the sexist language usage may reappear.

A limitation of this study is that there is no plan for future re-testing of these subjects to see if the pronoun neutralization process transfers outside the classroom. Had the experiment been conducted earlier in the semester, a posttest could have been administered at the end of the

semester. This would give some insight as to how the instruction impacted the student in his/her expression. For now, it is only beneficial to review the results, with hopes that changes are not temporary.

An inspection of sex differences and pronominal usage proves interesting. In the first essay males and females equally employed categories of incorrect, correct, and other forms. That is, 27% of females used 'he' and other incorrect forms, to 24% by the males. However, the percentages are less even in the results of the second essays. Males split 70/30 into correct versus incorrect forms while for females, only roughly 60% changed to correct forms, with 40% still using primarily the generic 'he' and singular 'they'. (It should be noted that 'they' was the second most frequent incorrect form to be employed in both sets of essays.) More specifically, in the first essays, eleven females used the generic 'he' as compared to six males. In the second essays use of the generic 'he' decrease, but females used 'he' three times as often as did males. Why are females more apt to use the generic 'he' when describing status than males? More importantly, why are females reluctant to eliminate usage of the generic 'he' when it has been demonstrated to exclude and oppress women?

An explanation is tentative, but it may be that women are still prone to stereotype males as being generally high in status. Males, possibly more aware of women's increasing visibility in high status occupations, may more readily accept linguistic innovation. Research to date has not addressed this possibility; therefore, conclusions remain speculative.

This research has demonstrated that male and female college students differ in pronominal usage when ascribing status in written expression (research question 1). It has also been shown that instruction on sexist language use can serve as an effective linguistic change agent (research question 2).

Todd-Mancillas (1981) supports linguistic change through education and research. He views education as functioning:

> . . . to encourage students to pursue their own individual potential and constructively surmount the constraints, including socially prescribed gender roles, that make it difficult for people to actualize their potential (p. 107).

Adamsky (1981) and Richmond and Dyba (1982) have conducted promising research demonstrating the effectiveness of education, specifically classroom interaction, as a linguistic change agent. Teachers must become aware of sexist language issues, and discover their own potentialities in terms of impacting linguistic, and possibly, social change.

FUTURE OF GENDER-RELATED RESEARCH

What can be gained from gender-related research? Results of gender research are inconsistent and controversial enough to warrant further investigation. Researchers should not abandon gender research with the simple declarative, "It's too confusing" or be stifled by results that are difficult to explain. The inconsistencies reveal change. It appears that societal sex roles are changing in a variety of researchable ways. Communication scholars must choose to investigate the effects of these changing roles on communication patterns and linguistic innovations. It is not enough to merely include sex as a control variable, or to use the argument, "The sexes <u>are</u> different, <u>have been</u> different, and <u>will be</u> different. So why do anything about it?" as a reason to preclude sex-related research as a viable and important contributor to social change.

In summary, this research has attempted to contribute to the body of knowledge on gender and linguistic behavior. Specifically, this study

investigated students' pronominal usage in ascribing status. The results of the study add to the somewhat confusing, but exciting patterns that are emerging in communication research. Discrepancies in the research should not, however, cause one to "muddle about" and eventually abandon sex-related research using a repertoire of excuses. The knowledge awaits discovery; the work is challenging and potentially gratifying.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Nonverbal Communication

MIDTERM EXAMINATION -- ESSAY QUESTIONS

QUESTION 2: Consider the high status individual. Describe the nonverbal behavior of this person, in terms of the environment, physical appearance and clothing, and kinesics. Be specific and use references from the text and your notes. (15 points)

APPENDIX B

Organizational Communication

MIDTERM EXAMINATION -- ESSAY QUESTIONS

QUESTION 2: Consider the high status individual. Describe this person in terms of his/her environment, physical appearance, clothing, and organizational status symbols. Be specific, using references from the text and your notes. (15 points)

APPENDIX C

OUTLINE OF SEXIST LANGUAGE LECTURE

1. Old rules -- the use of the generic 'he'
2. Other generic forms and subsequent changes:

   Examples: salesperson, chairperson or chair, policeman/woman
3. Examples of inappropriate & incorrect usages:

   "The doctor will pick up his books."

   "The nurse will pick up his books."
4. Incorrect use of 'they'
5. Correct forms: 'he/she'; 's/he','him/herself'
6. When in doubt, which forms to use -- include male and female references.